

SOCIAL MEDIA AS A CONDUIT FOR TEACHER PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT IN THE DIGITAL ERA: MYTHS, PROMISES OR REALITIES?¹

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Abstract: It is generally accepted that effective teacher professional development is critical to effective educational improvements and reforms of any educational institution. However, a conventional form of teacher professional development is constrained by time and space and, more often than not, there is a lack of perpetual support to teachers in the wake of a training program. An alternative way of teacher professional development therefore needs to be sought. This article argues that social media and all its facets open up new avenues for sustainable professional development and life-long learning in which case support can be obtained through virtual learning communities.

Keywords: social media, social networking sites, sustainable professional development, English teacher

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Demands for quality and effective teachers in today's schools and universities have resulted in teachers having to constantly upgrade their skills and knowledge (Yang & Liu, 2004) through a process known as professional development (hereafter PD). The term PD has been used to refer to "a variety of activities, both formal and informal, designed for the personal and professional growth of teachers..." (Eze, Adu, & Ruramayi, 2013 p. 6) Thus, teacher PD entails efforts in upgrading teachers' competence to make them more competent, skillful, knowledgeable, expert, and professional. This improved competence of teachers is, in turn, expected to ameliorate student learning and learning experience (Curwood, 2011). However, promoting quality teachers is an especially challenging task (Robinson, 2008). Whereas there is little disagreement concerning the need to support teacher PD, disagreement looms when it comes to how to go about doing it (Robinson, 2008).

It is generally accepted that effective teacher PD is critical to educational improvements of any educational institution (Desimone, 2009). Effective PD is defined as "structured professional learning that results in changes in teacher practices and improvements in student learning outcomes" (Darling-Hammond, Hyler, & Gardner, 2017 p. v). Thus, effective PD is associated with student achievement (Wenglinsky, 1998). However, the literature on PD appears to be inconclusive when it comes to providing 'effective' PD in the first place. Whereas some characteristics of successful PD have been encapsulated in the literature, there does not appear to be widely shared characteristics as different authors propose different characteristics.

By and large, conventional form of teacher PD takes the form of conventional face-to-face workshops or seminars which could last days, weeks or even months (Yang & Liu, 2004). However, such an initiative, commonly known as 'one-shot' teacher PD, has some inherent shortcomings. These drawbacks will be discussed in this article, and an alternative form of teacher PD will be proposed in light of these shortcomings.

CLASSICAL CHALLENGES TO CONVENTIONAL PD

To begin with, conventional teacher PD is strictly constrained by time (Lawless & Pellegrino, 2007) and space (Smith, Wilson, & Corbett, 2009) and, more often than not, there is a lack of continuing support to teachers in the wake of a training program. Of particular importance is the fact that teachers attending PD program need perpetual support to properly implement what they

have learned from workshops or seminars. Alas, with a conventional form of teacher PD, access to support for teachers who have just completed a PD program can be especially challenging.

A ‘one-shot’ training program has also been decried for it is not ‘sustained’ and ‘intensive’ – two critical characteristics of effective PD (McConnell, Parker, Eberhardt, Koehler, & Lundeberg, 2013; Wayne, Yoon, Zhu, Cronen, & Garet, 2008). Typically, in a conventional form of teacher PD program, interaction between instructors and participants and among participants inevitably ceases at the conclusion of the workshop and teacher participants have to work on their own to implement what they have learned from workshop sessions. The absence of social interaction in the wake of a PD program may have a deleterious effect on promoting changes to teaching practices. In fact, research evidence suggests that frequent social and professional collegial interactions are indispensable to PD as such interactions “can augment the effects of that professional development” (Penuel, Sun, Frank, & Gallagher, 2012, p. 109). Nonetheless, implementing new skills and changing ingrained teaching practices may be particularly exigent for some teachers in the absence of perpetual support in one way or another.

What is more, ‘one-shot’ workshops, at times, involve teachers teaching different grades and even subjects paying no heed to the fact that these teachers may have different individual needs (McConnell et al., 2013). Some teachers may need to improve their skills in instructional design; others may need to upgrade their skills in curriculum and pedagogy and so on and so forth. Research evidence has consistently shown that PD activities relevant to teachers’ needs, coupled with extended support, are critical to success in teacher PD program (Borko, 2004). Thus, workshop content should be tailored to teachers’ needs and continuing support should be provided. When teachers from different backgrounds and subject areas are assembled for workshops, such PD will likely fail to bring intended changes in teacher teaching practices (Smith et al., 2009). Conventional forms of teacher PD:

have been criticized as being fragmented, excessively top-down and too isolated from school/classroom realities to have a strong effect on practices; they have also been claimed to lacking in focus and do not focus enough on a particular area of teaching discipline. Furthermore, follow-up sought by teachers were often not present (Yang & Liu, 2004, p. 734).

With a conventional form of teacher PD, limited opportunities are available for teacher participants to share what works and what does not in the wake of a teacher PD program, especially for those who teach in remote areas (Anderson & Henderson, 2004). As mentioned earlier, social and professional interaction with facilitators or trainers and with other participants normally stanches at the conclusion of a PD program. We would argue that this is perhaps one of the fundamental drawbacks of conventional ‘one-shot’ PD – the absence of reflective discussion and exchanges of ideas between participants and facilitators and among participants themselves following the training program. An alternative form of teacher PD initiative should enable social interaction between interested parties, especially when teacher participants have all returned to their schools to implement new skills and teaching practices.

Another criticism pertains to the quality of conventional teacher PD program. Borko (2004, p. 3) notes that ‘quality’ has been a concern for the majority of teacher PD program through the provision of “fragmented, intellectually superficial” seminars or workshops. Such a program has also failed to provide continuing support to teachers. Another shortcoming concerns logistical problems. Obviously, to travel to, and from, the workshop venue, teacher participants should spend a certain amount of money (Smith et al., 2009). Anderson and Henderson (2004) conclude that “such approaches simply are not effective means for generating improvements in teacher practices and student learning” (p. 383), a concern which is also shared by Kearns (2002).

Furthermore, a conventional form of teacher PD may disrupt teaching and learning at schools as teachers have to be out of the classroom during regular class hours (Brooks-Young, 2001; Wayne et al., 2008). Whereas the absence of a handful of teachers should not be a problem for schools with copious teachers, this should clearly be a real concern for schools where there is a shortage of teachers and this is what normally happens in schools located in remote areas.

Simply put, a classical form of teacher PD program on its own appears to be insufficient and does not appear to be effective in promoting changes in teacher teaching and student learning (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017). Teacher PD program should go beyond a ‘one shot’ training program (McConnell et al., 2013). An alternative form of teacher PD is sought and we have proposed a blended form of PD incorporating social media networking sites to support social interaction and collaborations between workshop facilitators and teacher participants and among teacher participants themselves following a PD pro-

gram. In the following section, a rationale for the integration of social media networking sites into a teacher PD program will be provided.

INTEGRATING SOCIAL MEDIA INTO CONVENTIONAL PD

A blended form of PD combines both face-to-face sessions (conventional form of PD) and online components. In this case, PD sessions are conducted face-to-face with a workshop facilitator as usual. At the conclusion of a PD program, a Group is created, using social media networking sites (such as Facebook), so that participants and instructors can share and discuss ideas related to implementing new skills and teaching practices. Integrating social media into a PD program is essential to ensure that ongoing discussion and sharing of ideas among participants sustain, especially following the conclusion of a PD program (Anderson & Baskin, 2002). This way, participants can support one another in their attempt to implement new skills and gradually change their own teaching practice in light of best practice recommended during the workshop. This is particularly important for teachers working in remote areas where access to support is quite a challenge. What is more, through reflective discussion on the Group, instructors can have a better grasp of the nature of teachers' difficulties in trying to implement what has been learned from the workshop, thus helping them prepare a better PD program in the future. Thus, not only is continuing discussion on the Group useful for teachers, it is also essential for workshop facilitators in an attempt to prepare better and more relevant workshops in the future.

Furthermore, through a social media Group, teachers can share *what works, what does not, and why* based on their first-hand experience implementing recommended teaching practices. Teachers can also seek help from other group members regarding, for example, syllabuses, course materials, teaching methods, assessment strategies, curricula and so forth. It is through this dynamic interaction and collaboration that teachers can receive support from other Group members. Thus, being actively involved in discussion with other fellow teachers, following a teacher PD program, can promote reflective teaching which is critical to changing teaching practices. It can also diminish a sense of isolation, especially for those working in remote areas. In fact, it is probably justifiable to argue that more learning can potentially occur during this reflective discussion and sharing of ideas on the social media Group compared to what participants learn from a 'one-shot' training program. More importantly,

dynamic social interaction among workshop participants outside the workshop venue is more likely to make teacher PD a more sustainable initiative compared to a ‘one-shot’ training program. Anderson and Henderson (2004) note that sustained PD is critical to effective teacher learning. Indeed, changing teaching practices requires collaborative efforts (Holmes, Preston, Shaw, & Buchanan, 2013).

We have thus far argued that integrating social media into a conventional teacher PD program may help address issues related to lack of support provided to teachers and lack of social interaction between teachers and facilitators and among teachers themselves in the wake of a workshop program. We shall now turn to the idea of using social media beyond the purpose of a conventional PD program through what is commonly known as a virtual professional learning community.

SOCIAL MEDIA, PROFESSIONAL LEARNING COMMUNITY AND TEACHER PD

Ford, Branch and Moore (2008) use the term ‘virtual professional learning community’ (hereafter VPLC) to refer to teacher learning that takes place virtually using a wide range of communication tools including, but not limited to, synchronous (video conferencing) and asynchronous (bulletin board discussion) communication using different types of platforms. VPLC enables teachers from different geographical locations to collaborate and discuss issues related to teaching practices and pedagogy using technology. Ample research evidence suggests that professional learning communities are indispensable to teacher learning (Henderson & Gornik, 2007) and networking is, thus, vital to PD (Bodell & Hook, 2011). Trust (2012) has vehemently argued that:

The teachers that stay in their isolated classrooms and do not reach out for help typically teach the same way regardless of the new theories of learning or the new challenges in their classroom because they do not have the knowledge to change. Successful teachers endure the vulnerability of being a learner and take risks to provide the most effective instruction to their students (p. 138).

Virtual professional learning communities play an increasingly significant role in PD of teachers where teachers of English could collaborate with other English teachers from different corners of the globe (Servage, 2009). Collaboration based on collegial partnership is central to teacher professional learning.

Being involved in a ‘knowledge-building community’ could help teachers develop their knowledge of the subject matter as well as pedagogy (Yang & Liu, 2004). Teachers worldwide are now involved in professional learning communities through which they can collaborate, as well as provide and give support, advice or feedback regarding issues related to PD such as use of teaching techniques and pedagogies (Trust, 2012). This way, inexperienced teachers may work with more experienced ones or even with experts in the field, share ideas and best practices in the field. This process of social interaction, equipped with abundant resources on the net, enables less experienced teachers to experience “gradual enculturation into a community of teaching practitioners” (Yang & Liu, 2004, p. 735) which, in turn, helps them get acclimatized to standard teaching practices in the field.

To date, numerous social media Groups are available. English teachers may subscribe to a wide array of Groups of English Teachers at a local, national, regional or even international level. In these social media Groups, various issues pertaining to English language teaching and learning are discussed and, at times, top ELT scholars also participate in the discussion and sharing of ideas. Group members can freely post queries, respond to posts, post links, share teaching practice that works/does not work, etc. We would argue that being actively involved in these professional Groups of Teachers of English promotes lifelong learning and sustainable PD as Group members are kept up-to-date with contemporary issues related to all areas of English language teaching and learning. Most importantly, both resources and support can be accessed through this Group. This form of teacher PD also takes care of most, if not all, classical drawbacks associated with a conventional form of PD such as the need to travel to the workshop venue which often bears financial consequences (Yang & Liu, 2004)

Thus, social media along with all its facets opens up new avenues for sustainable PD and life-long learning beyond the quintessential ‘one-shot’ workshop. In particular, social networking sites and apps, such as Facebook, Twitter and WhatsApp, to name a few, serve as a platform that could harness social capital and support collaborations, exchanges of ideas and resources among teachers of English locally, regionally, and internationally. Bodell and Hook (2011), echoing previous studies, note that provisional support and guidance can be obtained through networking with like-minded people. Through social networking sites, teachers can engage in various professional activities, discussion, sharing and learning, thus supporting the notion of life-long learning in its

broadest sense. Social media also provides opportunities for informal PD, the experience of which is limited before the advancement of Web 2.0 (Carpenter, 2015). Although Web 2.0 was not specifically designed for the purpose of teacher PD, their relevance for this purpose becomes immediately apparent (McLoughlin, 2011).

Furthermore, social media such as Facebook provides both synchronous and asynchronous communication tools necessary for effective communication. Use of both synchronous and asynchronous communication is critical to teacher PD. For example, using synchronous communication such as teleconferencing, “teachers can share expertise, try out new ideas, reflect on practices, develop new curricular ideas and, most importantly, develop online/teaching community” (Yang & Liu, 2004 p. 735). Facebook also enables the creation of hyperlinks to valuable resources available on the net and to quizzes for evaluation. Using social media, teachers can collaborate and exchange ideas about teaching practices with not only local teachers of the same profession, but also with those from far-flung educational professionals from different parts of the globe (Trust, 2012). Through social media networking sites, teachers can post or respond to comments at their own convenience (Trust, 2012). This social and professional interaction and exchanges of ideas could help teachers reflect on their own teaching practice, and be exposed to new ideas and perspectives, thus improving their teaching practice. They may even seek help or advice and share best practice. In fact, amongst the benefit of social media from the standpoint of teacher PD is that it provides immediate access to information (Cleary, Ferguson, Jackson, & Watson, 2013) and it exposes one to people of a similar profession internationally (Cleary et al., 2013).

The use of social media to support teacher PD is well in line with contemporary learning theory such as Social Constructivism. As far as Social Constructivist Theory is concerned (Felix, 2005), learning is a social activity and learning for teachers is no exception. In a traditional conventional way, teaching is conducted with little time, if any, for collaboration among teachers and for sharing of experience of best practice among teachers. Social media, however, enables social interaction among teachers and sharing of teaching experience and resources (Holmes et al., 2013), which are all critical to teacher PD. Most importantly, English teachers can interact with other teachers of similar profession and interests locally, regionally and internationally. Since social media enables teachers to develop and extend their professional learning networks, it is important to convince them of the value of the new technology for

their PD (Holmes et al., 2013). Simply put, social media supports collaborative learning among teachers and research evidence suggests that sustained PD which involves collaborative learning is effective in changing instructional practices resulting in improvement in student learning (McConnell et al., 2013).

Due to the potential of social networking sites in supporting teacher PD, research studies have been conducted with PD utilizing social media. Holmes et al. (2013), for example, investigate the effectiveness of Twitter for teacher PD. It was reported that the social networking site proves to be a valuable tool for accessing both invaluable educational resources and social support. The study concluded that Twitter is a great potential tool for sustainable teacher PD. These findings are well in line with what has been reported by previous studies (e.g. Pluss, 2008; Wright, 2010). Similarly, Jenkins, Purushotma, Weigel, Clinton and Robison (2009) reported that Twitter enables pre-service teachers to be in touch with practicing teachers in the process of sharing of ideas and discussion which familiarize pre-service teachers with teaching practices in the field. The social networking site also enables teachers to take control over their own PD (Risser, 2013). Carpenter (2015) examined the use of Twitter by pre-service teachers. It was reported that most participants had positive perception about the Twitter's educational potential and indicated their intentions to use the platform for professional purposes in the future.

Additionally, being connected to social networking sites enables rapid and real-time information sharing and receiving, thus fostering access to information related to the English language teacher profession. Also, being connected to social media enables teachers of English to make connections with other English teachers who share similar interests. At the moment, there are myriad English Language Teachers Facebook Groups on the Net where teachers of English locally, regionally, and internationally can join for free. Some examples of the English Teachers' Facebook groups are as follows:

Teacher Voices: Professional Development
<https://www.facebook.com/groups/teachervoices/>

Indonesian English Teachers' Club
<https://www.facebook.com/groups/IndonesianETC/about/>

English Teachers in Indonesia
https://www.facebook.com/groups/ETINDO/?ref=br_rs

Discussion on these forums is dedicated to issues pertaining to English language teaching and learning and most, but not all, of the members are teachers of English at different educational levels. Through this group, English teachers can share and discuss ideas (teaching strategies, lesson plans, activities, useful websites, books, and any issue related to English language teaching, to name a few), help and support one another, and collaborate. Similar discussion is also found on Twitter. Some examples are provided below:

Team English https://twitter.com/team_english1
Teacher of English <https://twitter.com/teachofenglish>

Trust (2012) identified three major social networking sites relevant to teacher professional development:

Classroom 2.0 <http://www.classroom20.com>
The Educator's PLN <http://edupln.ning.com/> and
Edmodo <http://www.edmodo.com>.

Moderators of social media-enhanced PD program should be trained on how to use both synchronous and asynchronous communication tools to promote both collegial social interaction and reflective conversations (Yang & Liu, 2004). Similarly, it is essential that social media-enhanced PD workshop provide learning environments that promote personal, social and professional interaction by means of sharing of ideas and thoughts, seeking help and advice and sharing best/bad practices (Yang & Liu, 2004). Simply put, with the miraculous power of social networking sites, teacher learning is no longer constrained by time and space and, most importantly, support is always accessible through networking with other English language teachers. We further argue that social interaction and collaborations with like-minded people could lead not only to improved professional and personal skills of English teachers, but also to better well-being in general.

CONCLUSIONS

Effective teacher PD is central to educational improvements of any educational institution as it has a direct impact on student learning and learning experience. However, designing an effective PD program is quite a challenging task. Conventional 'one-shot' teacher PD has been decried for it fails to pro-

vide sustainable PD. In fact, amongst the major drawback of a conventional form of PD is that social interaction among workshop participants and between participants and facilitators stanches at the conclusion of the workshop. As a result, teachers are left on their own to implement new skills and teaching practices they have just learned despite the fact that research has consistently shown that collaborative efforts are required. This paper has argued that incorporating social media as an accompaniment to a conventional form of teacher PD ensures that ongoing discussion and sharing of ideas between participants and facilitators and among participants sustain. What is more, with the miraculous power of social media, teachers of English can participate in so-called virtual professional learning communities, in which case, collaboration based on collegial partnership is critical to teacher professional learning. Thus, social media along with all its facets opens up new avenues for sustainable PD and life-long learning beyond the quintessential 'one-shot' workshop. More importantly, use of social media to support teacher PD is well in line with contemporary learning theory.

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